



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Thursday, September 12, 2002

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Department of Health Awarded Grant to Study Causes of Birth Defects

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Four out of every 100 pregnancies are affected by a medically concerning birth defect. The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) has been awarded a five-year, \$5 million grant to study the causes of birth defects, such as spina bifida, defects of the heart, lip and palate. In addition, researchers hope to find new tools to prevent birth defects. Some Utah parents and their children will be asked to participate in the study when it begins in 2003.

Utah's 2nd Congressional District Congressman Jim Matheson was notified of the grant recently by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Support for this type of research is critical to the work of Utah health researchers looking for the cause of spina bifida and other birth defects," says Rep. Matheson. "I will continue to support increased research funding so that programs like this can continue to bring hope to Utah families." Utah is one of seven states receiving the grant which include California, Texas, Arkansas, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Iowa.

The research effort will be conducted jointly between the UDOH and the University of Utah's Health Sciences Center, Division of Medical Genetics. "Being part of this collaborative effort is extremely exciting," says Marcia Feldkamp, principal investigator and director of the UDOH's Utah Birth Defects Network. "We have the ability for the first time to investigate genetic and gene-environment interactions involved in causing birth defects with a large population. This collaborative group combines the best and the brightest in the field working collectively towards identifying causes of birth defects and potential prevention tools."

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University researchers, Dr. John Carey, pediatric geneticist and Professor of Pediatrics, and Dr. Michael Bamshad, a molecular geneticist and Associate Professor of Pediatrics, are equally excited about the study. “We are looking forward to discovering factors that might lead to better ways to prevent birth defects in our children,” says Dr. Carey. “This award provides us with an exciting opportunity to further understand the genetic basis of the heart defects that so commonly affect Utah families,” says Dr. Bamshad.

The cause of many birth defects is not known. For birth defects with known causes, most are the result of a chromosomal or genetic abnormality. Less than five percent of all birth defects are caused by known environmental sources.

The UDOH’s Utah Birth Defect Network (UBDN) monitors the occurrence of birth defects statewide and provides information and referral services for parents of children with birth defects. The UBDN also assists health care providers seeking accurate, up-to-date information about birth defects. For more information about the UBDN or the new birth defects study, call 801-584-8443.

The UDOH and University of Utah’s Division of Medical Genetics also provide accurate and current information about the effects of environmental exposures on unborn babies and breast-fed infants through the Pregnancy RiskLine – a free telephone resource to health care providers and the general public. In Salt Lake call 328-2229, outside Salt Lake 1-800-822-2229.

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